Family Group Conferences: a luxury or necessity in statutory child welfare? A Local Authority perspective

Paul Nixon, Strategic Lead Restorative Practices – Hull City Council
`Imagination is more important than knowledge’

*Albert Einstein*
If things go wrong in child welfare we do more of the same….but harder and for longer…..

….we reinforce the orthodoxy through more procedures, more external regulation, more standards, more structures and more management control…..
`Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results’

Albert Einstein
What is happening now? (1)

- Orthodoxy of professionals `in control’
- Procedural and managerial annexation of practice
- Fear something will go wrong?
- `Top down’ models cast families as `dysfunctional’, `uncooperative’, `dangerous’
- Focus is on professional activity
What is happening now? (2)

- Increased anxiety = increased referrals, interventions, legal proceedings…
- PLO has become a bureaucratic process
- Legal colonization of decision making
- System overload - delay and lack of time
- Performance management : chasing numbers
- Unintended consequences & `perverse incentives’
Has Social work become a little too bureaucratic...?
What do we need to do differently…? 

- Re-imagine what Child Welfare looks like
- Invest in Family & Community strengths & skills
- Building Social Work confidence and skills
- Deconstruct some old systems & bad habits
- Improve service user & community involvement
- Create a clear legal mandate for FGC
- Develop a whole system approach
What should Social Work practice look like?

- Child centred
- Family focussed & culturally responsive
- Based on clear principles and values
- Strengths based & solution focussed
- Open and mutually accountable
- Transforming collaborative relationships
What Works?

“The most important condition for success was found always to be the quality of the relationship between the child’s family and the responsible professional”

DH 1995
`Emphasis on the phrase ‘common language’ implies that the skill is in the agencies talking, but inquiry reports and research demonstrate that to the contrary: the skill is in the listening’

(Raynes 2004)
Practitioners will need…

- Professional confidence, learning, skills and reflexive culture
- Political and community support
- Strong theory, knowledge & research
- To change assessment processes to be more collaborative
- To `have questions, not answers…’
- To develop skills in partnership
Key changes we need with FGC (1)

- FGC as part of a whole practice and legal system that is congruent, rather than hostile
- FGC to become a child’s Legal Right before Care Proceedings or becoming Looked After
- Use FGC and Restorative Justice for Youth Offending
- Deconstruct unhelpful systems / habits - e.g. areas of performance management, procedures, ICS.
Building a congruent practice system

**Child, Young Person**

**Family**
- FGC, Kin care, Strengths based Solution focussed practice

**Schools**
- FGC, Restorative practices, participation, Solution focussed & interagency work

**Community**
- Inter agency work, User involvement, Citizen panels, community & restorative conferences
Key changes we need with FGC (2)

- Wider development of related practices: culturally responsive, strengths based, solution focussed, restorative, kinship care etc.
- Build theory, knowledge, skill
- Understanding FGC as part of a national and international development
- Research & evaluation of outcomes
Creating change

Changes to institutions / whole systems

Changes to outcomes

Changes to routines, experiences, attitudes

Changes to inputs/processes and structures

Population affected

What changes can FGC achieve?

- Reduction of numbers of children in care
- Savings in child placement – reinvested
- Reduced legal proceedings
- Less children in child protection systems
- Increase in kinship placements
- Engaged and energised workforce – doing real social work
- Better outcomes for children
Achieving real change...

He that complies against his will is of the same opinion still

Samuel Butler (1612-1680)
Making change work...

Change is disturbing when it is done to us, exhilarating when it is done by us

Rosabeth Moss Kanter,
Harvard Business School